

Grade Retention and Social Promotion

Although retaining students who fail to meet grade level standards has limited empirical support, promoting students to the next grade when they have not mastered the curriculum of their current grade, a practice termed social promotion, is not an educationally sound alternative. For these reasons, the debate over the dichotomy between grade retention and social promotion must be replaced with efforts to identify and disseminate evidence-based practices that promote academic success for students whose academic skills are below grade level standards. NASP urges educators to use methods other than grade retention and social promotion to ensure that all students have access to effective and equitable education.

Grade retention in U.S. schools has a long history characterized by fluctuations in the frequency and application of this educational practice. The majority of studies conducted over the past four decades on the effectiveness of grade retention fail to support its efficacy in remediating academic deficits (e.g., Jimerson, 2001). However, because students are not randomly assigned to this intervention, a failure to adequately control for pre-existing differences between retained and promoted students that may affect students' academic and social-emotional trajectories leaves open the possibility that pre-existing vulnerabilities rather than retention per se may be the cause of poor post-retention outcomes. Consistent with this possibility, recent studies utilizing more rigorous methods to control for selection effects are less likely to report negative effects (e.g., Hong & Yu, 2008; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2008; Hughes, Chen, Thoemmes, & Kwok, 2010). Retention effects also vary depending on whether retained and promoted students are compared at the same grade or the same age. When retained and promoted peers are compared at the same age, retained students achieve at a slower rate. When retained and promoted peers are compared in the same grade, retained students experience a short-term boost that dissipates within 4 years (Wu et al., 2008). When the measure of achievement is closely aligned with the curriculum, as in the case of state accountability testing, retention bestows short-term benefits (Hughes et al., 2010) but there is no evidence of long-term benefits for students.

ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION

NASP encourages school psychologists to collaborate actively with other professionals by assuming leadership roles in their school districts to implement models of service delivery that ensure:

- Multitiered problem-solving models to provide early and intensive evidence-based instruction and intervention to meet the needs of all students across academic, behavioral, and social-emotional domains
- Equitable opportunities to learn for students from diverse backgrounds
- Universal screening for academic, behavioral, and social-emotional difficulties
- Frequent progress monitoring and evaluation of interventions

Furthermore, NASP urges schools to maximize students' opportunities to learn both in and outside of school through effective teacher professional development and extended day/year programs. Grade retention is a costly intervention with questionable benefits to students because, for students who attended school regularly, having them repeat the same grade with the same instruction will yield no improvement for the student. Except in very rare circumstances when a student has missed a large number of school days, grade retention and social promotion are not recommended. Instead, students whose performance is substantially below their grade level peers need an intensive individualized intervention plan with frequent progress monitoring and involvement with specialists and related services providers, in order to ensure the maximum benefit for the student.

Additional information concerning grade retention and social promotion practices can be found in the following NASP documents:

- NASP White Paper on Student Grade Retention and Social Promotion
- NASP Position Statement on Appropriate Academic Supports to Meet the Needs of All Students
- NASP Position Statement on Appropriate Behavioral, Social, and Emotional Supports to Meet the Needs of All Students

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